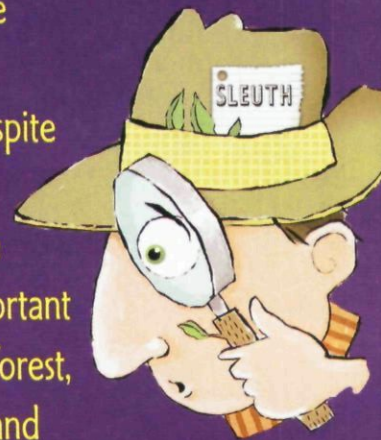




# *Strangler* in the Rainforest

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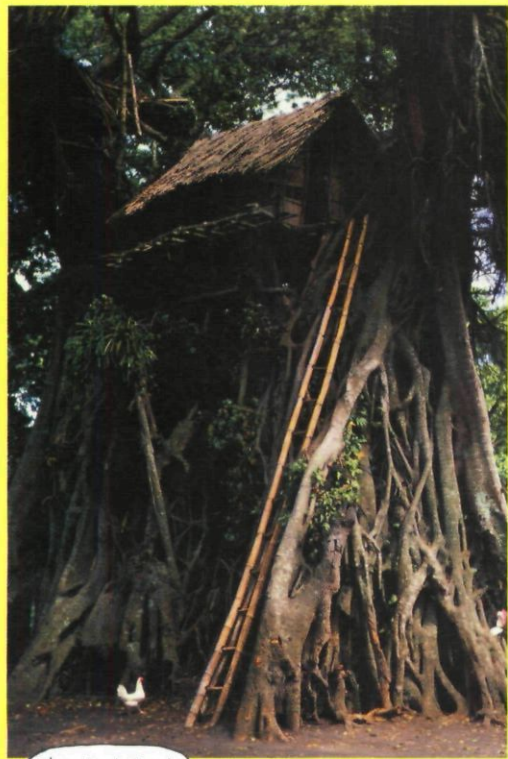
Can you spot the strangler in this photograph? Despite its murderous behavior, it's one of the most important trees in the rainforest, providing food and shelter for many species of animals.



**Y**ou might think of a rainforest as a kind of paradise for plants—a warm, wet, tropical world just perfect for stretching out your leaves and roots. There's always plenty of rain—more than eight feet falls each year—and rainforests tend to be near the equator, where they receive lots of sunshine year round.

A fantastic variety of plants flourish under these conditions. But the abundance of plant life also means there's lots of competition for nutrition and sunlight. On the dark and crowded floor of the rainforest, it's hard for a new plant to take root and grow.





Banyan trees in Southeast Asia are some of the largest trees in the world—and they're strangler figs! They become huge because, as their branches grow outward, roots descend to the ground to prop the branches up. A banyan tree in India had more than 1,000 prop roots, and its branches covered an area equal to about four football fields. The banyan tree in this photograph isn't that big—but it's plenty big for a fabulous tree house.

One plant, the strangler fig, has found an unusual way to cope. It doesn't start out on the ground and grow up. It

begins life a hundred feet above the forest floor in the leaves and branches of another tree, then sends its roots down. And while it doesn't hurt its host tree for many years, eventually it becomes ... a strangler.

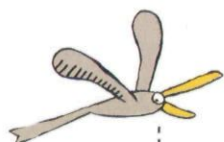
## A Strangler Grows

Strangler figs start life innocently enough when birds and animals feasting on figs poop out the seeds. Most of these seeds land on the forest floor and never sprout. But some of the tiny, sticky seeds land high in the treetops, in crevices of branches where wet, rotting leaves collect. There's plenty of sunlight in the treetops, and there, a tiny seed has a much better chance of growing into a fig tree.

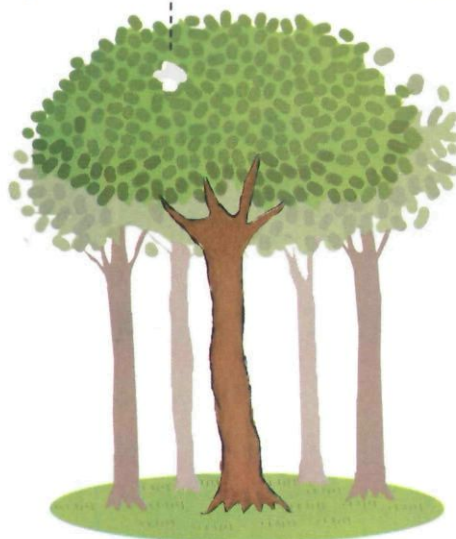
The young fig slowly grows, sending down long, thin roots. Some of the roots

OK, who helped this strangler fig start growing?

Don't look at me! Marvin was eating figs, too.



## Strangling in Three Easy Steps



Step 1: Planting the seed



Step 2: Sending roots to the ground



Step 3: Strangling the host tree



dangle freely in the air. Others snake down the trunk of the host tree. If they grow past a crook or cranny where dead leaves have collected, they will send out small rootlets to take in nourishment. When two root tips meet, they join together. Over time, a web of fig roots surrounds the host tree.

It may take several years for the roots to grow all the way down to the forest floor. When they finally reach the ground, they burrow into the dirt. Then, like other plants, the fig tree takes in water and nutrition from the soil through its roots.

## Good-bye, Old Friend

The strangler fig grows faster once its roots reach the ground. Now, the underground roots compete with the

What's missing from this picture? The host tree that once grew inside the web of strangler fig roots has rotted away. But the criss-crossing trunk is a great place for many animals to find a home.



Throw a fig my way.




Strangler figs aren't all bad. In fact, without the strangler, many animals in the rainforest couldn't survive.

Unlike most plants, a fig tree bears fruit several times a year. In the rainforest there are more than 1,000 species of figs bearing fruit at different times. That means there's always food available for birds, bats, wild pigs, and hundreds of other kinds of animals—including this gibbon.

roots of the host tree for food, and the roots wrapped around the trunk of the host tree get thicker. As they tighten around the host tree, they crush its bark and slow the flow of nourishing sap in the tree.

Eventually, the strangler fig grows taller than its host. Its leaves and branches shade the host tree and rob it of sunlight. Finally, the host tree dies, from shading, root competition, and strangulation.

After a few years, the host tree rots away and the strangler fig tree stands alone. 

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